Hours of Opportunity

How Cities Can Build Systems to Improve Out-of-School-Time Programs

High-quality out-of-school-time (OST) programs that engage students in activities after school hours and during the summer have been shown to positively affect children's development and reduce negative behaviors. However, the systems that provide these programs in urban centers have been criticized for being fragmented and uncoordinated, resulting in poor quality and insufficient access for those most in need of services. To address these issues, The Wallace Foundation established an initiative in 2003 to help five cities develop better coordinating mechanisms to reduce OST fragmentation, redundancy, and inefficiency and to increase OST access and quality. The initiative provided grants to Providence, Rhode Island; New York City; Boston; Chicago; and Washington, D.C. The sites were asked to work toward four common goals: increasing access, improving quality, developing and using information for decisionmaking, and planning for sustainability. In 2008, The Foundation asked RAND to assess the progress of these five sites. The first in the resulting three-volume series describes the sites' work under the grant and analyzes the conditions and activities that contributed to the cities' progress toward meeting their goals.[1] The findings suggest some themes that other cities working to improve OST programs should consider as they move forward.

Key findings:

- In five sites, coordinated system-building efforts helped improve access and quality for OST programs to varying degrees.

- Investments in collaborative early planning contributed to success; sites that did not engage in such planning made less progress.

- Collecting consistent data on enrollment and participation supported efforts to improve quality and collaboration among organizations.

- Mayoral involvement was essential, and active mayors provided crucial support by restructuring organizations, realigning funding, creating advisory positions to ensure cooperation, and demanding analysis of outcomes to inform future funding decisions.

Each City's Unique Context Determined Its Goals and Approaches

Based on its unique conditions, each site selected a slightly different focus under the umbrella of the four common goals, such as a targeted age group, targeted locations, or an emphasis on quality over access. The sites also adopted an array of ways to improve access and quality. Improving access involved shifting resources to meet the needs of underserved populations and using mechanisms to increase enrollment, such as placement of programs in neighborhood schools, providing transportation to and from programs, providing programs at no cost to participants, and launching online program locators that parents and students could use to identify programming in their local area. The sites

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[1] The second volume in the series, *Hours of Opportunity, Volume 2: The Power of Data to Improve After-School Programs Citywide*, provides a detailed analysis of the cities' progress in building and implementing management information systems to track student participation and is available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1037.1/. The third volume, *Hours of Opportunity, Volume 3: Profiles of Five Cities Improving After-School Programs Through a Systems Approach*, presents case studies of the five Wallace initiative cities and is available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/technical_reports/TR882/.

addressed quality by adopting standards, assessing program quality, providing professional development, and evaluating efforts under the initiative.

Coordinated System Building Can Improve Access and Quality

Four of the five sites succeeded in increasing the number of students served. At the end of the study, all were in the process of building systems to assess program quality and foster improvement. Four of the cities were using management information systems that tracked OST program participation to improve decisionmaking in support of greater access and quality. Thus, the results of The Wallace Foundation investment provided some evidence that city organizations can work in a cooperative fashion to serve more youth and promote better OST services and programming.

Investments in Early Planning and Information Systems Can Yield Benefits

The early planning performed under the grant required careful consideration of assets, organizational stakeholders, existing challenges, and available funding as each site identified targets for improvement. Several cities conducted market research and gap analyses that proved to be crucial starting points for their efforts: This work identified areas of the city without OST programs, age groups that lacked accessible services, and issues of concern to parents and students that acted as barriers to participation. Plans were developed to target these specific issues. Collaboration in those early planning efforts supported shared goals among city agencies. Sites such as Providence and New York City benefited from collaborative early planning, while one site that did not stress the development of shared goals did not fare as well.

Collaboration Assisted System Building

New York City and Providence adeptly used collaborative approaches to make significant progress toward the larger goal of a more coordinated system. Boston struggled with collaboration in the early years of the initiative and thus made less progress in developing a more coordinated system. Chicago concentrated its early efforts on the development of management information systems to enable further col-

laboration in its OST system. Washington, D.C. encouraged collaboration among OST providers through a city-level coordinating structure, while the school district simultaneously conducted a major initiative mostly on its own.
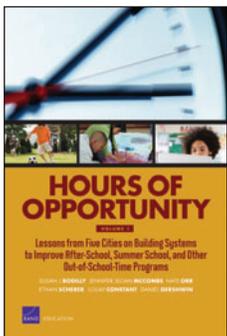
The sites used a variety of collaborative mechanisms, including data collection and analysis to identify gaps in provision; consolidating functions within specific agencies; establishing a coordination structure, such as a steering committee; giving a special adviser the authority to ensure interagency cooperation; establishing memoranda of understanding across agencies to document specific agreements; creating structures for cross-agency information sharing; and providing incentives and supports for coordination.

Mayoral Support Promoted Collaboration and System Building

Most sites rated the mayor's support as essential because mayoral authority could break down barriers. In three sites, mayoral involvement went beyond simple encouragement or "bully pulpit" statements. Active mayors crucially supported efforts in their cities by restructuring the organizational landscape, realigning funding sources, creating special adviser positions to ensure cooperation across agencies, chairing forums and overseeing intermediaries, and requesting analysis of outcomes for consideration in funding decisions.

Other Cities Should Consider the Key Enablers of OST Improvement

Other cities interested in developing systemic approaches to providing OST services must do so within their own contexts. However, the study identified several important enablers of collaborative efforts that other cities might consider. They include building a common vision among stakeholders, conducting an early needs assessment, developing a management information system, and gaining buy-in from an actively supportive mayor. In addition, buy-in from schools and investment funding strengthened the efforts. The key constraint cited was funding—either a lack thereof or "stovepiped" funding mechanisms that prohibited integrated services. Over time, small steps toward OST system building can add up to significant improvements for underserved children. ■

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